

## Early Recollections of Duxbury Beach

By THE REV. ROBERT CANON MERRY

If you dig a few feet down in the sand on Duxbury Beach at the junction of High Pine ledge and the beach you will probably uncover a few lumps of anthracite coal. I recall my father's driving into our yard with a team of horses and a load of coal, perhaps a couple of tons of it. A barge loaded with coal probably from the mines of Sydney, Cape Breton Island in Canada, and bound for the Cordage then operating under steam power had snapped its tugboat towline in heavy seas and foundered on the ledge, spilling its entire contents on the beach. Dozens of townsfolk had turned out with their horses and wagons (of course no trucks could make it) and stored up this space heating material for the approaching winter. Most of them heated their houses with wood but a modest addition of a grating could convert their stoves to coal. We had an enormous cook stove in the kitchen with its copper hot water tank attached, and a parlor stove in our sitting room and this was all the heat we had except for a kerosene stove in the upstairs bathroom. I helped unload the coal and this is my first recollection of Duxbury Beach.

As time went on we harvested other crops from the beach, chiefly kelp for fertilizing our corn fields. I also recall our spreading kelp on some lawns in town. When violent northeast storms struck there was always a legacy of kelp and it was free for the taking. So I had a double reason for resenting these storms, one for the snow we had to remove and another that meant a frigid trip to the beach. But our crops on North Hill showed the results and that made it all worthwhile.

My second recollection of the beach was during World War I when the minesweeper *Swan* grounded on the ledge and hung there for 3 or 4 months until 2 ocean-going tugs pulled her off one high course tide and set her free to sail again. She was the goal of many a Boy Scout hike, for she was a sorry sight, her decks awash and all her living compartments open for exploration. A 34-foot Pearson yacht foundered on High Pine ledge a few years ago and a yellow plastic ribbon was staked out a few yards all around her with dire warnings if anyone ventured aboard. I am sure at least a dozen ships have foundered on this ledge, mariners choosing to cut across the ledge rather than going around the red spar buoy that marks its extremity -- a 100-yards from shore.

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My Cub Scout and Tenderfoot years that saw me being initiated into the wonders of the world of nature and enlisted my ability to cooperate with the wonders of the world of nature-- Duxbury Beach was a treasure house for merit badge work. We would run the required 2 or 3 miles measuring our distance with the telephone poles, running between one set and walking the next. In the days when permits were not required for campfires on the beach we learned how to do this. First we dug a hole in the sand, then picked up flat stones to make an oven. Driftwood was available in abundance, caught in the grasses and shrubs of the sand dunes. The cooking badge was achieved by frying a 1/4 pound piece of steam brought from my father's meat market and wrapping a strip of flour paste diagonally around a stick. The best part of these training sessions was building tepee-like lean-tos up against the dunes and bedding down for the night. It was one way to appreciate a soft warm bed and a good meal at home.

My next continuing association with the beach was in the gunning stand period. It is hard to believe today, with our sharpened sensitivity about wildlife, that there were these organized enterprises to waylay the ducks and geese on migratory journeys from the arctic marshes of northern Canada to the warmer climes of the southern U.S. and the marshes of the Gulf of Mexico. Michener in his book *Chesapeake* has told in lurid detail of this activity as it was carried on in a different setting. Duxbury Beach, Clarks Island, and the marshes around the bay had at least a dozen of these stands. Somewhere mere straw blinds. Others were more elaborate, with dormitory space, banquet and pool halls and stables for horses. My father, being the only horse owner now that Briggs' stables had moved from Bluefish River to Alden St. to be near the railroad station, was given the task of ferrying supplies to some of these stands. We would pick up medicines from Paul Peterson's drugstore, groceries from Sweetser's and meat and milk from our warehouse closet cooled by ice from Round Pond and be off. I'll be honest and say that I enjoyed these trips because Father arranged them often at Sunday School time. And as I walked behind the wagon flailing my arms to keep warm, I thought to myself, "This is tough, all right, but at least I am getting out of Sunday School."

My most difficult trip to one of these stands happened one Wednesday afternoon when my sister Ruth offered to go with me as company. We hitched up Prince, one of our heftier horses instead of docile Molly because we wanted a fast trip. Picking up our various products we set out for the beach at a brisk trot. It was plain to see Prince was as anxious to get this thing over as



expeditiously as we did. We made the stand, Hunt's I believe it was, just as the sun was setting. We drove Prince into a small enclosure and proceeded to unload the wagon. After we finished, the custodian asked us in for a cup of cocoa and a donut to warm us up for our drive back in the biting wind. We must have lingered a half hour because it was so warm and snug and the cocoa and donuts tasted so good. When we emerged from the cabin it was pitch dark, not only that, but Prince was nowhere in sight. We simply couldn't believe it. It was hard to see in the darkness but after a thorough search, it proved to be true, Prince had gone. Where would he go? He didn't know the beach or the way home. Perhaps he had hiked on down to Gurnet. Who could tell? We were beside ourselves, but there was nothing for it but to hike up and down the dunes with their high grass going from one telephone pole to the next as we sighted them against the starry sky. Finally we reached the last post and the bridge and did it ever feel good to find those pine beams under our feet. When we got home tired and hungry, Father had few words for us: "At least that horse had some sense."

I thought of this trip and the fight through the dune grass and the climbing up and down the dunes when Don Beers took Harriett and me to see the devastation wrought by the "Nameless Storm" of Oct. 30 and wondered about the power of Mother Nature on a rampage. The beach was flat as a pancake the entire length up to High Pines. "You could land a 747 anywhere on it," said Don, summarizing the damage the storm had done.

The next beach involvement in what I will call "extra-curricular activity" was rum-running. Strictly speaking the beach involvement itself was minimal but the bay and inlets around Duxbury, Kingston, and Plymouth were very much involved in what became a major commercial and illegal enterprise. The Volstead Act prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages was passed in October 1917 in the moral euphoria of World War I. Wilson believed it was unenforceable and he was proved right in the end. It was January 1919 before it was to go into effect and actually enforcement vehicles were not in place until about a year later. Most of the contraband entered the U.S. by a series of "mother ships," i.e., large lumber schooners who sailed down from Canada with liquor brought from Europe and in many cases passed through the French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon. These ships anchoring beyond the 3-mile limit and thus outside law enforcement agencies would be met by fast speedboats which would dart out from shore, make a quick load and an even quicker landing in some hidden inlet, to be met

by trucks who would whisk it away to hideaways and ultimately the "speak easies" of our large cities.

There were some weird ironies in this enterprise. One was the fact that one of the temporary storage boathouses in Duxbury lay at the end of Water St., owned by Dr. Richardson, the personal physician of President Calvin Coolidge whose wife was national president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. As they were loading or unloading cases of liquor into this boathouse in the late fall and winter, fears were expressed that the WCTU president might make a surprise visit and would she be surprised! Legends abound in Duxbury over these rum-running escapades and most of them have a basis in fact. One that I recall vividly was the race between a Coast Guard ship and a rum-runner speedboat. It was high tide and the speedboat circled the bay tossing its 5 gallon cans of Belgian alcohol overboard, then slipping over the piece of marsh below what is now Battelle property -- deep enough for the motor boat to pass over but the Coast Guard cutter with its 5-foot draft hung up high and dry and as low tide approached the Green School, youngsters were treated to this embarrassing sight as they passed Josselyn's Variety Store and Len Morgan's Blacksmith Shop.

I think the best Duxbury story is of a truck overloaded after a midnight landing at Howland's was making its way around the south end of Captain's Hill when it capsized. There were still not yet many phones in Duxbury, but even at 3 am, news traveled fast and the greatest traffic jam in Duxbury had experienced took place on the spot. No one could find the drive of the truck but it was soon bereft of its cargo and remained unattended for several days until Cushing's garage sent a wrecker over and towed it in. It remained unclaimed several more days until one night it just disappeared. A Long Island story is of a rum-running vessel that foundered on a beach in a storm whereupon nearby villagers turned out with rescue craft to save not the men on board but the cargo of liquor.

Matters grew from bad to worse when the U.S. government moved the enforcement limit to 12 miles instead of the traditional 3 and mother ships became armed with cannons as large as those of the Coast Guard. The enterprise therefore became a coastal warfare and international incidents began to multiply.

One involved a ship named *I'm Alone* that opened fire on a Coast Guard cutter which returned the fire and sank the ship with all its cargo and some loss of life. A subsequent court trial established that the ship in question was sailing in international waters (off Cuba)



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and the U.S. had to pay a heavy fine. Everyone was greatly relieved when Prohibition was voted out with the election of FDR and now it remains a sad and sordid memory. It began effectively in 1920 and continued for 12 years. Many of my Duxbury acquaintances were involved and law enforcement officials found themselves trapped in a desperate business and were thankful when it had come to an end.

No story of early beach recollections would be complete without a reference to Gurnet Bridge, the one great facility that furnished access to the beach. The first wooden bridge, called either Long Bridge or Gurnet Bridge, began in 1892 and completed in 1895 at a cost of \$30,000. Because sailing ships had the right of way so to speak over automobiles, it had to have, like all bridges over navigatable waters at the time, an opening for vessels powered by sails and using masts 30 and 40 feet could pass through. This bridge's draw was manipulated by means of a chain and a hand crank, and was located with its tie-up platforms directly over the channel. A mariner would tie his craft to the platform, climb the railing and crank up the draw, then climb back onto this boat, sail through, tie up on the other side, returning to lower the draw. The support posts for the draw with their system of pulleys over which the chain had to roll were about 10 feet high. I recall as we were using the railings at high tide, dare devils like Eben Briggs would shinny up the post and dive from there a distance of at least 15 feet.

It was about this time that automobiles had come into general use, especially model T Fords and folks from factory towns like Rockland and Brockton and Whitman would roll by the hundreds to the sea coast for a dip in the cool ocean. Duxbury Beach was a welcome haven for them, dashing on occasion from the hard pan turnaround at the bridge's end in an often vain attempt to reach the more hardened edge of the beach. There was no parking lot, nor of course any inside road down the beach. I remember pushing cars through the sand on hot summer Sunday afternoons. Cars mostly parked on the bridge itself and visitors made make-shift bathhouses with towels hung on rolled up windows. It was a scene of enormous confusion with people walking on the bridge, cars coming and going, and no attempt to keep order. This was especially risky as often happened when someone dropped a cigarette down between the cracks of the sap-soaked wooden beams. My most hair raising experiences were riding our '23 Brockway fire engine down the bridge with Ed Baker at the wheel and me winding the siren for all my might as we slid between parked cars and approaching ones ahead of us.

All this brings us to the present day when water access is a hot issue. I did a research study on town landings (there were 22 originally and now there are 8) to find out where the public could reach water. Most landings were effectively closed off by disuse so I felt a wave of indignation on what I saw was a serious public deprivation. People it appeared had bought waterfront property and usurped the rights to the water. But one Sunday I went to the beach which as we all know has water access both at high and low tide, and the spectacle of hundreds of 4x4 vehicles and people lining the sand all the way to High Pines, gave me a new insight. Duxbury Beach had become Duxbury's number one recreational facility. Why bother with obscured town landings when for a modest fee you can drive down the beach sand and enjoy the clear sparkling cool water of the ocean itself?

This does raise the question as to just how many can enjoy the beach this coming summer with the flattening of its dunes and the shortening of its breadth. The Beach Reservation and the Beach Committee with all available town earth-moving equipment are hard at work to repair the loss of the "nameless storm," but it will take time and labor and much money to put things back where they were. A "save the beach" committee has been organized and we'll be working together to restore a precious part of the quality of life our beloved town provides.

I do have one closing thought, "If John Wright had had at his disposal the earth-moving equipment in 1890 we have today, I feel sure he would have acted as promptly as we have to secure our barrier beach."